

A new freeway fight brews, this one over waste dump

BY J. LYNN LUNSFORD
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A growing suspicion that hazardous waste may be buried beneath an abandoned North Side chemical plant has added yet another obstacle to plans for one of the most controversial freeway projects in Fort Worth history.

The Texas Department of Highways and Public Transportation wants to build a bridge over the historic Samuels Avenue neighborhood on a bluff above the Trinity River, avoiding land owned by American Cyanamid Co. less than a mile from the Tarrant County Courthouse.

"We don't know what's out there," said Billy Hardie, the highway department's

ment's Fort Worth district design engineer. "We have just heard some things that would lead us to believe we don't want to take this land and then use highway funds to clean up any hazardous waste."

But preservationists and Fort Worth officials prefer a plan agreed upon earlier, which would bring the Southwest Freeway down from the Trinity River bluff, through a man-made valley south of the neighborhood and across the chemical plant property — a route that would preserve a stately row of 19th-century mansions.

"We feel very strongly that the plan we already approved works," said Mar-

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sey, has dismissed allegations that there is toxic waste at the site.

According to city and federal records, American Cyanamid operated its chemical plant on the bank of the Trinity River for nearly 40 years before closing in July 1983.

For most of that time, the company manufactured a catalyst to remove impurities from crude oil. During World War II, the plant produced a catalyst to remove sodium and nitrogen from aviation fuel.

"We have heard rumors for several years that the plant was producing a nerve gas during World War II," said Lt. Ken Hinds, Fort Worth Fire Department hazardous material officer. "But the company denies that the plant was even a defense plant."

Hinds said the Army has done a survey of the chemicals at the site but has refused to tell the city what was found, citing reasons of national security.

Fears that toxic waste could exist at the site are fueled by health problems developed by those who worked at the plant for years.

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ty Craddock, executive director of the Historic Preservation Council for Tarrant County. "Let's not build a freeway around something that needs to be cleaned up."

Jonathan Nelson, a Fort Worth attorney who represented the I-CARE group in its bitter 1983 fight to eliminate the Interstate 30 overhead, said he is appalled that the highway officials would suggest going around the chemical plant at the expense of local history.

"Forget about the freeway," Nelson said. "If there is hazardous waste material on that site, isn't somebody going to do something about that now instead of pretending it doesn't exist?"

Officials are not certain that hazardous waste is buried beneath the plant, but former plant employees have said they buried tons of toxic material at the site during a period after 1946.

But a cloak of secrecy imposed by the U.S. Army and the company's refusal to

divulge information have convinced state highway officials that some things are better left alone.

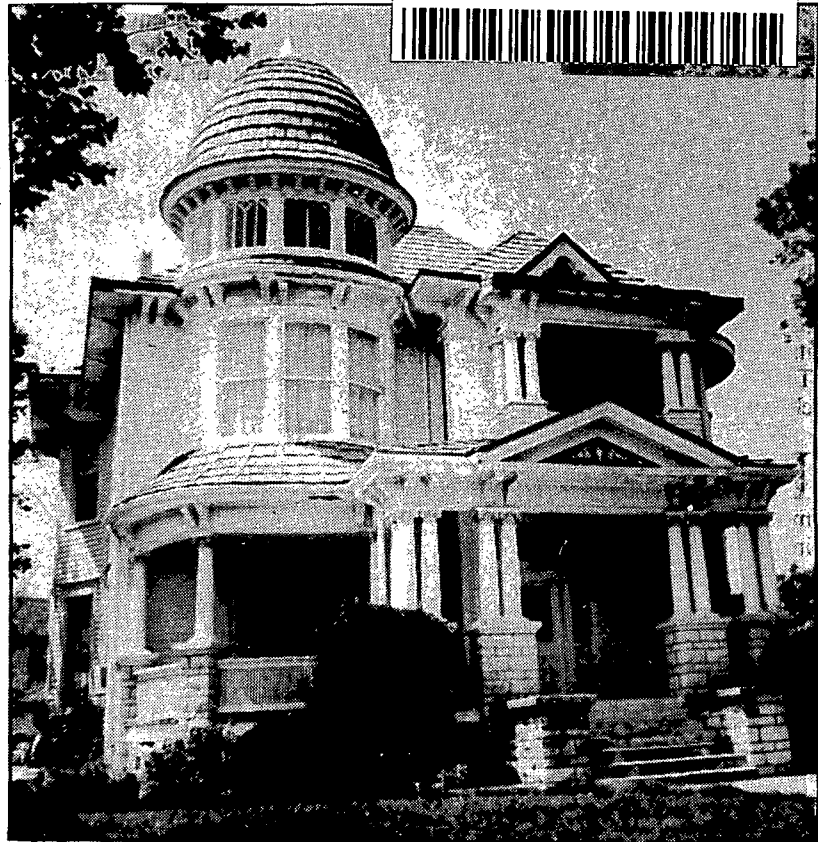
City officials say they are in a Catch-22 situation: They don't want the freeway to harm the mansions on the bluff. They don't feel comfortable not knowing if hazardous chemicals are actually buried at the site. And they don't even want to think of the cost of a major environmental cleanup.

The Environmental Protection Agency, which has tackled several toxic waste sites around the nation through the federal government's Superfund, has said it does not have enough evidence to take any action.

Because the plant is on private property, the highway department or the city would have to purchase the land before tests could be conducted without permission from American Cyanamid. Then, according to federal law, the highway department would be liable for any expenses to contain or remove the waste.

The chemical company has not given permission for any testing. The company, which has headquarters in New Jer-

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Fort Worth Star-Telegram / RICKY MOON

Historic homes such as the one at 769 Samuels Ave., owned by Brenda Kelly, are one reason many object to the highway department's bridge plan.

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Since 1980, at least 15 of the plant's former employees have suffered maladies including chronic lung disease, heart attacks and damage to the central nervous system and brain. At least two of those employees have died, and several others have lawsuits pending against American Cyanamid.

"There is no telling what the company buried out there," said Dr. Herman Rose, a Fort Worth physician who treated many of the employees. "I don't doubt their stories, but I couldn't say what was out there."

Texas Water Commission officials say they supervised the removal of waste from two disposal pits on the 34-acre property in 1981. However, a large landfill behind the plant was not disturbed, records show.

It was in this landfill that former employees say they were ordered to bury hundreds of drums containing toxic chemical residue from batches of catalyst that did not meet production standards.

"We know that there are some vanadium constituents as well as some copper in the soil out there that are contained by clay," said water commission spokesman Bill Colbert. "As long as the pit is not disturbed there should be no problem."

Vanadium is a heavy-metal catalyst. Colbert said that because federal environmental rules have been strengthened since the time the plant closed, disturbing the contents of the pit could force a cleanup that would cost an estimated \$30 million.

"We keep wanting to believe there is nothing there," said Assistant City Manager Rick Hay. "If there was something there, you would think the drums would be deteriorating and we would be able to see chemicals in the water table."

So far, tests by the Fort Worth-Tarrant County Health Department and the Texas Water Commission show little contamination of the water table. Both agencies have detected small amounts of copper, lead, nickel, cadmium, chromium and vanadium around the site, but all are within acceptable limits.

Soil tests around two drainage ditches leading to the Trinity River, located about 200 yards away, indicate that some of the substances have washed from the surface of the plant site into the water.

"We can't say from the tests whether there is anything to worry about or not," Hay said. "The results just show the possibility that something is there."

In 1980, Environmental Protection Agency officials were tipped about the chemicals that the workers said they buried. Although the officials inspected the plant and took soil samples, they did not attempt to uncover whatever might be at the site.

"It would be difficult to say why we didn't take a sample," said Gerald Fontenot, a former EPA official, in a July 1982 Star-Telegram article. "One, I don't think we had the information to justify boring in there. It's an expensive proposition, and you could expose your people to some danger."

Fontenot said at the time that the EPA did not dig into the pits and survey the chemicals because of concerns that a drum of hazardous material might explode.

EPA spokesman Roger Meacham said last week that the agency has not been able to substantiate allegations made by the former employees.

"Based on all the information we have to this point, we can't justify the effort and expense to do a lot of excavating and exploratory work," Meacham said. "If we were to get something substantial, that would be a different story."

Meacham pointed out that if the company buried waste at the site, it probably did so before such activity became illegal.

Said the water commission's Colbert: "It is only in recent years, since the early 1970s, that we became aware that some heavy-metal and chemical wastes that were buried in the soil could degrade and become more hazardous than they were in their original form. As we become more informed, the laws are changed every few years to include more and more substances."

Fort Worth's Hay said city and state officials were promised by Ray Merrell, the environmental projects manager for American Cyanamid, that they would be allowed to conduct tests at the site, using four monitor wells that were drilled in 1981 by the water commission.

"To date, those tests have not been performed, so we're in a situation of trying to figure out what to do next," Hay said.

Repeated attempts by the *Star-Telegram* to contact Merrell and other American Cyanamid officials were unsuccessful.

Highway design engineer Hardie said the chemical plant is not the only reason officials decided to move the freeway route farther north.

"We had some concerns about making the interchange at Belknap work, as well as how the Pioneer Rest Cemetery and a small park would be affected," Hardie said. "All of that led to an expanded interchange that has to bend more to the north."

City Manager Doug Harman said the City Council will be briefed on the status of the freeway after Tuesday's council meeting. In addition to changing the route at Samuels Avenue,

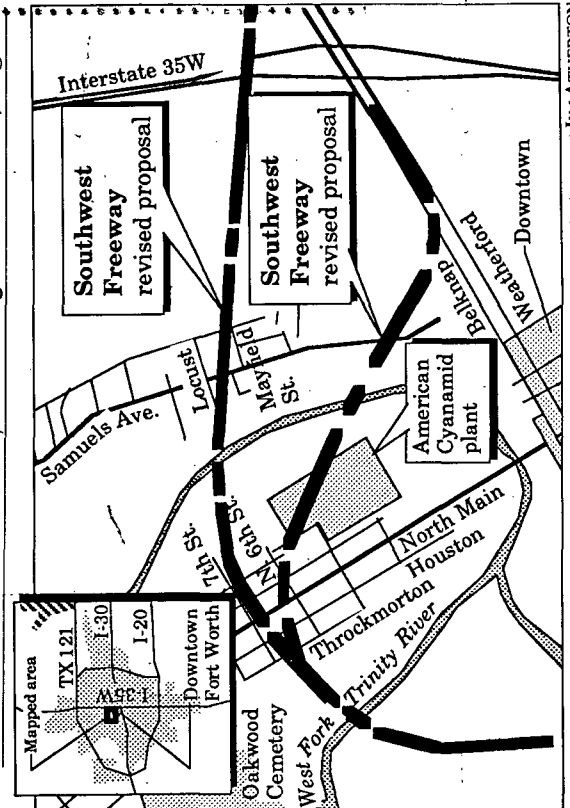
the highway department has proposed building an overhead along the Trinity River near Trinity Park.

This route also concerns some citizens groups because they say the overhead would interfere with the view of downtown from the Cultural District.

"The staff will be making recommendations to the council on what the city's position may be," Harman said. "At the staff level, we have a number of concerns, including the Samuels Avenue routing."

Cost for the entire 9.2-mile project, which would connect Airport Freeway with the West Freeway, is estimated to be \$314.9 million. The highway would run from Interstate 35W, north of the central business district to Interstate 30, and then south to Interstate 20.

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